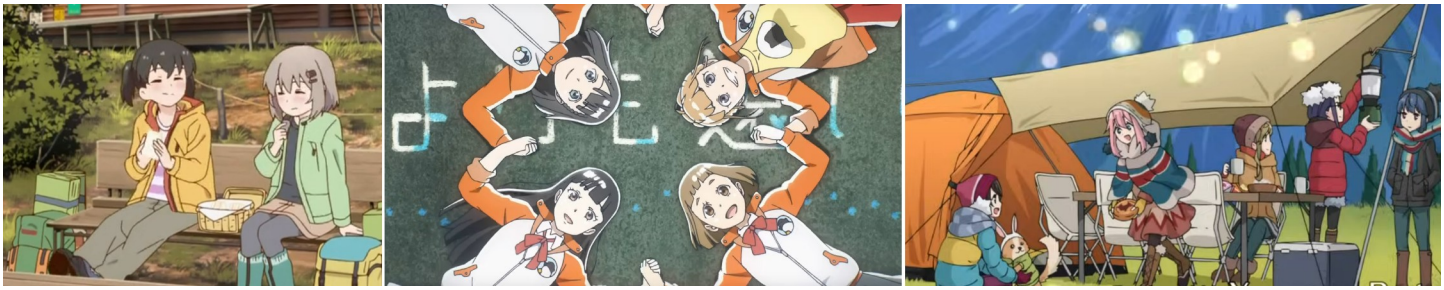
A trend toward “nomance” in animation?: Increased depictions of female friendships



Left to right: Encouragement of Climb episode 12 ending; A Place Further than the Universe opening; Laid-Back Camp opening 1

Recently, UCLA’s Center for Scholars & Storytellers released their Teens & Screens Report, which stated that of the over 1,600 adolescents they polled, over 63% preferred stories focused on platonic relationships/friendships, as opposed to romantic ones, with movies remaining a top choice for entertainment, and a preference for live-action *over* animation. Respondents still rated animation over cast and creator diversity, reviews, and advertisement, as a reason that series are watched. More specifically, the report said that those surveyed cited a preference for fantasy, as compared to a focus on relatable issues, real-life issues that affect society, or being rich/famous, along with looking for uplifting/hopeful content, action/fight scenes, superheroes, and friendships.

Poignantly, the report stated that a majority of study participants believed that “sex and sexual content are not needed to advance the plot of TV shows and/or movies” and called for *more* portrayals of characters who “lack sexual and/or romantic attraction to others” (i.e. asexual and aromantic) in media they consume. There are many other findings in this report, which follows similar reports by UCLA in 2022 and 2023. In the post, I’ll examine whether there *is* a trend toward what the report writers termed “nomance”, which can also be described as series focusing on friendship/platonic relationships rather than romantic ones, especially in Western animation and anime, for female characters.

Last year, to some consternation among social media users (especially those who are fans of girl’s love/yuri), Yuricon founder Erica Friedman penned an article on *Anime News Network* examining emotional intimacy among women in recent slice of life anime. She specifically said, in part, that she found the “explorations of friendship and joy between women and girls in these series” as significantly

healing, especially to her, as she had contracted Long COVID earlier that year. She further noted that many of these series have relatable protagonists, allowing viewers to recognize their own flaws.

Furthermore, she stated that bonds of friendship, and intimacy, are central to *Encouragement of Climb: Next Summit*, *Do It Yourself!!*, *The Aquatope on White Sand*, *Ippon Again!*, *A Place Further than the Universe*, *Minami Kamakura High School Cycling Club*, *Let's Make a Mug Too*, and *Laid-Back Camp* (and its *Room Camp* shorts). She noted that while she enjoys romantic ships, she said the fannish desire to "pair everyone in a series in a romantic pairing," obscures friendship between women.[1] She further said that media does a bad job of showing strong friendship bonds between women, and praised these anime for modeling female intimacy "as a powerful thing." *Encouragement of Climb* (Next Summit was a spinoff from this) similarly centers female friendship, as does *Hitori Bocchi no Marumaru Seikatsu* (about social anxiety as much as *Komi Can't Communicate* and *Bocchi the Rock!*, which are different in their own ways).

Thumbnail for the third version of the Wonderful PreCure opening, available on YouTube.

1 She went onto say, "in the non-media real world, women are likely to have many more kinds of relationships with the other women around them, than just lovers or family…nuance is lost when everyone is perceived as matched romantically with someone else, regardless of their actual relationship…I now crave [nuance] when I watch anime and…am…looking for more than just romance between characters. I find myself treasuring snapshots of emotional intimacy between women without the need for the relationship to become romantic in order to be seen as intimate."

This year I originally tried to incorporate some of these ideas into a category I was calling "platonic yuri" (which another online commenter had coined). I defined it as "intimate friendships" or "romantic friendships" and differentiated it from "romantic yuri." Such a distinction was foolhardy on my part. Despite that, I *still* believe that a focus on strong friendships between women can be talked about in the *same space* as discussion about romantic relationships, in fiction, between women. I implied this when I first summarized Friedman's article, admittedly in a manner that could have been better thought out. Even so, I still agree with *part* of what I said, specifically that having affectionate or romantic friendships does not, necessarily, "remove any yuri themes" but means these characters "never enter into romantic relationships, but only remain friends."

Otherwise, this year, *alone*, there have been multiple series focusing on female friendships, even if you believe there is romantic subtext between some protagonists. Take for example the found family of women (and one man) in *Soaring Sky! Pretty Cure* who fight to ensure a princess is protected from the Underg Empire, or the women fighting side-by-side with their animal companions in *Wonderful Pretty Cure!*, to ensure the safety of animals taken over by dark forces.[2] While it not known how the latter series, which took the spot of *Soaring Sky!* when it ended in January 2023, will end, friendship remains at the series' core.

This year also featured: a group of schoolgirls traveling across an apocalyptic wasteland on a train, in some ways reportedly reminiscent of *Kino's Journey*, in *Train to the End of the World*; three women (Mahiru Kouzuki, Kano Yamanouchi, and Kimura) and one non-binary/gender nonconforming person (Nox Ryūgasaki) in *Jellyfish Can't Swim in the Night* forming their own music group, JELEE; five girls (Nashiko Jippensha, Pai Kawahigashi, Izumi Tokutomi, Riche Hayashi, and Haneru Emi) and the mahjong spirit Chonbo playing mahjong together in a vacant parlor in *Pon no Michi;* comradery and friendship between women (the protagonist Tonbo and fellow female golfers) in *Tonbo!* season 2. The latter echoes *Birdie Wing* (but with zero yuri subtext), in some ways. It is possible that the upcoming anime adaptation of the 14-minute film, in December 2021, entitled *Sorairo Utility*, will do the same as *Tonbo!* season 2, resemble *Birdie Wing* more, or something else entirely. It's hard to know until its release next year.

There have been other examples in recent years, including Yuna in a bear-suit, her assistant Fina, and other girls who adore her in *Kuma Kuma Kuma Bear*, a girl named Sarasa Feed forming her

2 The same can be said for other series within the Pretty Cure franchise, like the acceptable but far-too-short *Power of Hope: PreCure Full Bloom* in 2023, or the recent *Tropical-Rouge! Pretty Cure* (aired from 2021 to 2022). I haven't watched the series in the Pretty Cure franchise before *Tropical-Rouge! Pretty Cure* but from the clips I've seen, I believe they *also* focus on all-girl teams where the protagonists are friends.

own magic shop and helped by two adventurers (Iris Lotze and Kate Starven) and a local town girl (Lorea) in *Management of a Novice Alchemist*, and girls competing in intense judo competitions in *Ippon Again!* Other series focusing on female friendships include antics between Shinobu Omiya, Aya Komichi and Yoko Inokuma, British exchange students Alice and Karen Kujo, in *Kin-iro Mosaic*, girls forming a light music club in *K-On!*, and girls singing to make patients feel better / "cure" their ailments in *Healer Girl*. Some listed *Bocchi the Rock!*, *Little Witch Academia*, *Non Non Biyori*, *Nana*, *Azumanga Daioh*, *Nichijou*, *Princess Jellyfish*, and *Shirobako* as other instances of series centered on friendships between women.[3]

Thumbnail of opening for the second season of Bofuri, available on YouTube

Fans may have differing views, but on the surface, all the series in the Love Live! franchise, including the *Yohane the Parhelion* spinoff, involve the protagonists as friends. In fact, in a review on *Okazu* of

3 They also cite *Kimi ni Todoke*, *Puella Magi Madoka Magica*, *Lucky Star*, *Lucky Star, Girls' Last Tour*, *Carole & Tuesday*, *Aria the Animation*, *Girls Und Panzer*, *Yuki Yuna Is a Hero*, *Keep Your Hands Off Eizouken!*, *Cardcaptor Sakura*, *When Marnie Was There*, *How Heavy Are the Dumbbells You Lift?*, *Asobi Asobase*, *Comic Girls*, *School-Live*, and *Kageki Shojo!!* as other series with these same themes. In contrast, more recent series, such as *Girls Band Cry*, *Bang Dream! It's My Go!*, *Lycoris Recoil*, *Shy*, *My Deer Friend Nokotan*, and *The Many Sides of Voice Actor Radio*, have *some* romantic subtext, rather than the protagonists as friends. The same can be said about *Rinkai*, *My Master Has No Tail*, *Otaku Elf*, and *The Demon Girl Next Door*. Other series with such subtext include *Gunsmith Cats*, *Noir*, *Venus Versus Virus*, *Madlax*, and *Canaan*.

Love Live! School Idol Project season 1 only rated the yuri as a 1 out of 10 and said yuri is "nearly nonexistent here." A review of the second season only upped that to a 2 out of 10. In the latter, the reviewer said there's a lot of fandom chattering over "gestures that [I] don't read as particularly queer if you take off the Yuri goggles." These reviews are more accurate if viewers see the characters as *friends* instead of lovers.

In the recent, and third season, of *Love Live! Superstar!!*, the current iteration of the franchise, has some possible yuri subtext, but it remains focused on friendship between the girls in the Liella school idol group, Kanon and Chisato (a key point in the end of the show's second season) and the friendship-of-sorts between Kanon, Wien Margarete, and Onitsuka Tomari. The same focus on friendship is central to the other series in the franchise, specifically *Love Live! Sunshine!!* (2016-2017), *Love Live! Nijigasaki High School Idol Club* (2020-2022) [my favorite series in the franchise], and *Nijiyon Animation* (2023-2024). Surely fans can ship and see romantic vibes between the characters. That's fine, but truthfully, the series is about friends who make music together. This is even more the case than series like *D4DJ*, which has more romantic subtext.

Another series centered around female friendship is *Bofuri: I Don't Want to Get Hurt, so I'll Max Out My Defense*. The protagonists are Kaede Honjō, who takes on the game name of "Maple," and her school friend, Risa Shiromine, who takes on the game name of "Sally." They play an online fantasy game together. While both care for each other, and the series accepts different game play styles, the core centers on friendship between female cast members, and more specifically on "satisfying friendships that can form through online interaction." It is one of the series I will list on my list of the "Top Thirty Anime TV Shows of 2024" post which will come out later this year, along with 29 other anime.

Apart from this, the currently airing *Magilumiere Co. Ltd.* has a found family vibe, especially between protagonists Kana Sakuragi, who joins a magical girl start-up, and existing magical girl Hitomi Koshigaya (voiced by Yumiri Hanamori), just like *Acro Trip*. Friedman described the latter as saying it isn't her favorite yuri iteration but that she "won't pretend it doesn't fall under the big Umbrella o'Yuri for many." As such, it would fall into a series with *some* yuri subtext. Otherwise, another overlooked series centers on female friendship: *Super Cub*. A girl with nothing, Koguma, who buys a motorike, becomes friends with a forthright motorcycle user named Reiko. Later, Shii, who seems meek (but prim and delicate) at first, becomes more confident as the series goes on. They all form a friend group together that somewhat echoes *Laid-Back Camp*.

Thumbnail for the opening sequence of Nanenare Hanare, which is available on YouTube.

Lastly, there's *Narenare Hanare.* Like *Aquatope*, there are *no* canon yuri relationships. However, the series, focuses on friends who come together to cheer for others. In that way, it remains inspiring and uplifting for individuals in the same way that the slice-of-life series, which Friedman described earlier, do. That is the long-term impact of series such as these. In fact, with the premiere of *Narenare Hanare*, it is clear that P.A. Works is one of the studios leading the way with anime focusing on female friendship, acceptance, and found family (*Skip and Loafer* and *Mayonaka Punch).*

Western animation, in contrast, lacks a focus on female friendships, especially since 2010, compared to the 30 anime I have noted in this article as having such themes.[4] Jean Hennegan's post in

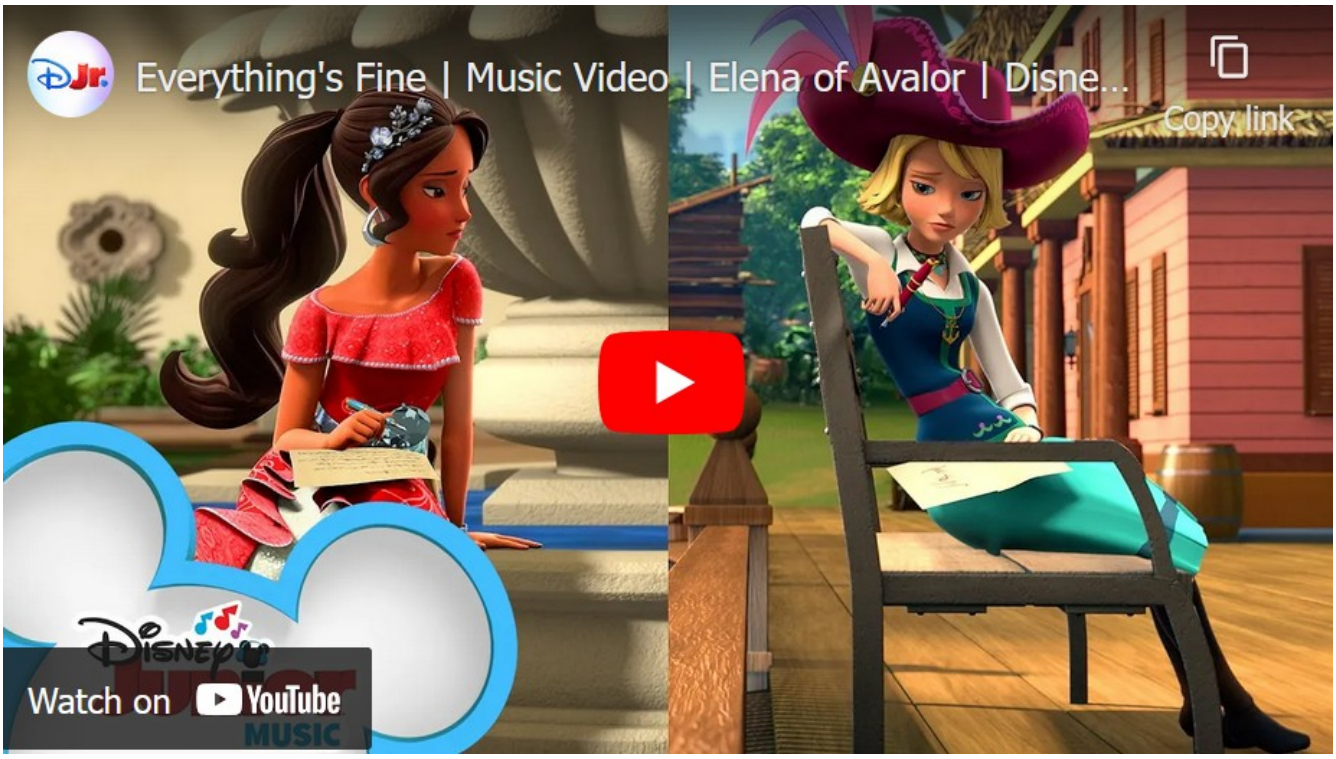
4 I noted the following 30 anime as having themes/plot centered around female friends: *Encouragement of Climb: Next Summit, Do It Yourself!!, The Aquatope on White Sand, Ippon Again!, A Place Further than the Universe, Minami Kamakura High School Cycling Club, Let's Make a Mug Too, Laid-Back Camp, Room Camp, Encouragement of Climb, Soaring Sky! Pretty Cure, Wonderful PreCure!, Train to the End of the World, Jellyfish Can't Swim in the Night, Pon no Michi, Tonbo!* season 2, *Kuma Kuma Kuma Bear, Management of a Novice Alchemist, Kin-iro Mosaic, Healer Girl, Yohane the Parhelion, Love Live! School Idol Project, Love Live! Superstar!!, Love Live! Sunshine!!, Love Live! Nijigasaki High School Idol Club, Nijiyon Animation; Bofuri: I Don't Want to Get Hurt, so I'll Max Out My Defense; Super Cub, Hitori Bocchi no Marumaru Seikatsu* (I think all of her newfound friends are girls), and *Narenare Hanare.* I'm not sure entirely, but I think *The Stories of Girls Who Couldn't Be Magicians* may fall into this category too, as may *Tamayomi*, which Erica Friedman describes as "a story about teamwork and friendship."

2020 rings true for Western animation: “shows built on female friendship…simply focused on the friendship and not outside influences…are still shockingly rare on television.” In the animation industry, the latter is clearer due to Disney’s unfortunate cancellation of *Neon Galaxy*, a series by the talented Molly Ostertag (wife of *She-Ra and the Princesses of Power* showrunner ND Stevenson).

According to Ostertag, the series would have focused on two girls, Coral and Amber, who live on an asteroid with their dad, and talented singer Coral wants to start a band, which her drum-playing sister, Amber joins. They call the band Neon Galaxy. They later meet Blu (who plays every instrument) and fashion designer Indigo, who joins their band, and they face rivals.

In contrast, a recent example of a series *centered* on female friendship is: *Moon Girl and Devil Dinosaur*. The strong bond between Lunella Lafayette and Casey Calderon is at the show’s core. While some ship them, the fact is that in-canon, they are very good friends, despite their occasional fights with one another. They support each other, with Casey helping Lunella as Moon Girl, and helping her fight against villains, with her trusty dinosaur companion, Devil. Some claimed that Disney cancelled the series, but this has not been confirmed.

In any case, *Moon Girl* is the most prominent currently-airing animated series focusing on female friendships. *Hilda* would be in this category too, as there is a female friendship between Hilda and Frida. She also has strong friendships with David and Alfur, a sometimes testy relationship with her mom, and goes on magical adventures. That series, unfortunately, ended in December 2023. Even so, the centrality and importance of friendship, including between female characters, carries through in the novel adaptation, with the power of friendship as central as it supposedly is in *Lego Friends*, which has a song about friendship.



Music video, on YouTube, of the song "Everything's Fine", in Elena of Avalor, a duet of Elena and Naomi

Similarly, *Elena of Avalor*, for which one of the main drivers of the series is the friendship between Crown Princess Elena Castillo Flores and a girl around her same age (effectively) from the port, Naomi Turner, lasted for three seasons, from 2017 to 2020. Again, some people ship Elena and Naomi, which isn't a surprise. In the canon itself, they are friends. Disney axed the series, causing its final season to end in August 2020, without any hope of continuation. The series is a breath of fresh air. Other Disney princess series have romantic themes (like *Rapunzel's Tangled Adventure*). Elena is never romantically paired with *any* character.

There's another series I almost forgot about: *Supa Team 4.* It ran for two seasons in July 2023 and December 2023. It centers on four teenage girls in Lusaka: Komana Mwiinga, Monde, Temwe, and Zee. A former secret agent, Mama K, assembles them into a team of four superheroes with magical girl transformations and special abilities. While some may have romantic feelings for men, *none* of them have romantic feelings for each other, and work together *as friends.* In this way, it resembles, in some respects, the long-running (a seventh season began in May of this year), pro-

consumerist, and animesque *Totally Spies*! series, which centers around three girls: Sam, Clover, and Alex.[5]

Otherwise, series like *The Proud Family: Louder and Prouder*, and the original *The Proud Family*, center around groups of female friends, with no romance within the group itself. This is also the case with female protagonists, Rosemary, Sage, Parsley, and Thyme, of the queer magical girl series, *High Guardian Spice* (HGS). In fact, Sage and Rosemary begin the series as childhood friends and become friends with the other two characters.

Series creator Raye Rodriguez acknowledged this, saying he purposely focused the series around four normal girls who become heroes and go on adventures but are "supportive friends to each other." He added that he wanted the series to have the *same* comradery as the all-female friend group at the center of *Magic Knight Rayearth*. HGS differs from *DC Super Hero Girls*, which centers on a team of female superheroes, and *Spirit Riding Free,* which brings together three horseriding girls: Fortuna "Lucky" Esperanza Navarro-Prescott, Prudence "Pru" Granger, and Abigail Stone.

5 Also consider the central focus of male-female friendships in *Iwájú*, *Hailey's On It!*, *My Adventures with Superman*, and *The Ghost and Molly McGee.* There's found family in *Scooby-Doo! Mystery Incorporated*, *Legend of Korra*, *Avatar: The Last Airbender, Star Trek: Lower Decks, Star Wars Rebels, Suicide Squad Isekai*, *Craig of the Creek*, *Unicorn: Warriors Eternal*, *The Dragon Prince*, *Dead End: Paranormal Park*, *Cleopatra in Space*, *Carmen Sandiego*, *gen:LOCK*, *Steven Universe*, *Star Wars Resistance*, *Danger & Eggs*, and *Star Wars: The Bad Batch*. It is possible that *Iyanu: Child of Wonder* will focus on male-female friendships as well, along with *Invincible Fight Girl* and *Jentry Chau vs. The Underworld.*

Full opening of Sailor Moon S (I believe) available on YouTube

With the troubled state of the animation industry in the U.S. (and streaming content stagnating), it is likely that anime will *continue* to dominate with stories focused on female friendships. After all, I only listed nine series above, which aired between 2010 and this year, and did not include the friendship among the four protagonists of *RWBY*, the comradery between the magical girls at the center of the hard-to-find animated series, *Mysticons*, or the camping girls who are protagonists of the upcoming *Lumberjanes* animated adaptation. Some have noted that some female-led cartoons, like *W.I.T.C.H.* and *Winx*, centered on female friend groups, as did *Sailor Moon*, a perspective which is not wrong.

This anime dominance will undoubtedly continue next year with series such as *Witchy Pretty Cure!! Future Days*, among others, despite the fact that there remain issues inherent to anime production. Similarly, there will likely be more anime with direct or indirect yuri themes, as there have

been in recent years.[6] I hope this improves in the future, with more Western animation focusing on female friendships to keep par with the anime focusing on the same thing.

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6 In fact, Crunchyroll leaned into this (and the idea that queer people are "just friends" when they are *really* romantic), including a video promoting *Metallic Rouge*, with the video clip, showing the two protagonists in a *seemingly* intimate scene, entitled "They Seem Like Very Good Friends." Otherwise, the following have direct yuri themes: *Whisper Me a Love Song*, *The Vexations of a Shut-In Vampire Princess*, *Akebi's Sailor Uniform* [confirmed in the manga], *Yuri Is My Job!*, *Stardust Telepath* [confirmed in the manga], *Adachi and Shimamura*, *Vampire in the Garden*, *El Cazador de la Bruja*, *Otherwise Picnic*, *Blue Drop*, *High-Rise Invasion*, *Beloved Zuko Streamer*, *Gushing Over Magical Girls*, *I'm in Love with the Villainess*, *The Magical Revolution of the Reincarnated Princess*, and *The Executioner and Her Way of Life*. There are others with (assumed) indirect yuri themes like *I've Been Killing Slimes for 300 Years and Maxed Out My Level* (season 2), *Momentary Lily*, *BanG Dream! Ave Mujica*, *Turkey!*, *Rock is a Lady's Modesty*, and *A Smile in an Unbearable Workplace.*